

# The Big One: *Naval Aviation Brings Relief to Earthquake-Ravaged Haiti*



*The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) arrived off the coast of Port-au-Prince within days of the 12 January 2010 earthquake*

*In the late afternoon of 12 January 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake shook the island nation of Haiti. In response to the devastation—an estimated 230,000 dead, more than 300,000 injured, and 1 million made homeless—governments and organizations from around the world sent aid. Naval Aviation played a crucial part in the overall U.S. response to the disaster—entitled Operation Unified Response—by providing mobility to materiel and personnel that simply could not be moved any other way. More than 20 Navy vessels and scores of aircraft participated in the operation. In total, U.S. military forces brought more than 17 million pounds of food, 2.6 million liters of water, and treated nearly 10,000 patients by the end of March 2010.*

## Ironhorse Does the Heavy Lifting

*By Capt. Paul Clarkson, USMC*

On 12 January 2010 an earthquake devastated Haiti, bringing chaos to what was already the Western Hemisphere's poorest country. The next day, II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) reformed the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) with HMH-461 as the aviation combat element and ordered an immediate deployment to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. A composite squadron was built around the CH-53E and its heavy-lift capabilities: Marines from HMH-461 and HMLA-467 embarked eight CH-53Es, four UH-1Ns, and detachments from Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 29, Marine Wing Support Squadron 272, and Marine Air Control Group 28 aboard USS *Bataan* (LHD 5) to form HMH-461 (Reinforced) within 72 hours. The squadron was placed under the command of Lt. Col. Sean Salene, commanding officer of HMH-461. HMH-464 also provided two of the eight Super Stallions that comprised the aviation combat element.

The extremely brief period of mobilization and the nature of the mission presented Ironhorse Marines and Sailors of HMH-461 (Rein) with a tremendous challenge. Flight operations began on 18 January with the launch of a section of CH-53Es conducting a reconnaissance of Haiti's devastation. The following day, the squadron launched a division of CH-53Es and a section of UH-1Ns into an earthquake ravaged area, assessing the damage and delivering much needed relief supplies. UH-1Ns and CH-53Es worked hand in hand throughout the operation. The Hueys provided vital aerial reconnaissance to leaders and planners, helping to maximize assistance by identifying tenable landing zones that could facilitate safe landings for CH-53Es where rotor wash would not harm people on the ground. "Big Iron" transported palletized cargo that included water, MREs, and medical supplies to people in need throughout Haiti. Maintainers and combat cargo loaders who internally loaded and unloaded five to six pallets per aircraft each time wheels hit the flight deck and the ramp came down on a Super Stallion.

Effective crew resource management was critical in the dynamic flight environment in Haiti. With the rapid influx of aid and military assets from around the world, and consequent difficulties in coordinating different agencies, the pilots and aircrews of HMH-461 (Rein) quickly realized they were operating in over-crowded and under-regulated airspace. This situation required them to be at the top of their game every time they pulled power in their aircraft. The demands of operating at high gross weights in the country's sweltering heat called for weight and power numbers to be checked and rechecked constantly to ensure aircraft were operating within safe power margins.

Flight operations were continuous for HMH-461 (Rein) until the end of March. The unit conducted a variety of missions throughout Operation Unified Response. In particular was the CH-53Es' transport of special operations sport utility vehicles to more remote regions of the country. The vehicles proved to be valuable assets to military and civilian teams that were on the ground assessing the impact of the disaster and identifying areas in need of more aid. Both CH-53Es and UH-1Ns transported large numbers of medical professionals and aid workers to areas that were difficult to reach by ground because of Haiti's damaged roads.

Aircrews and maintainers excelled in employing and maintaining their aircraft during this intense operational tempo, ensuring all missions were on time and successful. The contribution HMH-461 (Rein) made to Unified Response was significant: pilots and aircrews flew nearly 650 hours, moved almost 3,500 passengers, and delivered more than 530,000 pounds of relief supplies to Marines and aid workers on the ground for distribution. In addition, the squadron's maintainers performed more than 7,000 maintenance man-hours on the aircraft to ensure all assets were available to support every mission, every day, for nearly three months.

The success of this mission also signified a historic deployment for the heavy lift community. HMH-461 was the first East Coast CH-53 squadron to assume the command element of a composite squadron. The performance of the Marines and Sailors of HMH-461 (Rein) was nothing short of spectacular, and was in keeping with the professionalism and proficiency the Marine Corps has come to expect from the "Big Iron."

Capt. Clarkson is the aviation safety officer for HMH-461.



*Marines assigned to 22<sup>nd</sup> MEU carry bottles of much-needed water onto a CH-53E Super Stallion with HMH-461.  
(Photo by MC2 Julio Rivera)*

## Osprey Provides a New Tool

During its deployment to Haiti aboard USS Nassau (LHA 4), the 24<sup>th</sup> MEU's air combat element (VMM-162 [Rein]) included 12 MV-22 Ospreys alongside its usual complement of CH-53E Super Stallion, UH-1N Huey, and AH-1W helicopters. The Ospreys were the first to serve with the 24<sup>th</sup> MEU, and the first tilt-rotor aircraft to participate in humanitarian and disaster relief operations.

*"The Ospreys provide a greater lift, they're faster, and go farther than its predecessor and other similar aircraft," said Lt. Col. Robert C. Sherrill, the commanding officer of VMM-162 (Rein). "Those characteristics are powerful in a situation when the time is of the essence, whether it's taking casualties back to the ship for medical attention or relaying supplies. This aircraft provides a lot of depth as an [MEU] aviation element."*



*MV-22s with VMM-162 aboard USS Nassau (LHA 4) were the first Ospreys to use their unique capabilities in disaster relief missions. (Photo by MC2 Jason R. Zalasky)*

The Nassau Amphibious Ready Group, which also included USS Mesa Verde (LPD 19) and USS Ashland (LSD 48), was diverted to Haiti on 19 January from its regularly scheduled deployment to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet areas of responsibility. The group departed Haiti on 7 February having transported more than 55,000 lbs. of food, 14,600 liters of water, medical supplies, and 1,000 passengers. Medical and dental personnel from the 24<sup>th</sup> MEU treated more than 100 Haitians on the island of Gonave, and 16 Haitian earthquake victims were treated aboard shipboard medical facilities.

## A Whole New Experience

*By Lt. Cmdr. Michael Hansen, USN*

The earthquake that struck Port-Au-Prince brought a new mission to HSL-46 Det. 3's Screamin' Seagulls. The day after the earthquake, we found out that the work up we were scheduled to be part of the following week now was going to be a disaster relief mission starting sooner. Anticipating around-the-clock operations, we added two pilots and five air crew members to the normal det. manning, which consists of six pilots and three air crew members. Just two days after the quake, we found ourselves embarking on USS *Normandy* (CG 60) late on a Friday night for an early morning departure. Most of the air crew had little or no experience with humanitarian assistance or disaster relief missions, mountain flying, or the practical application of confined-area landings.

During the transit, as det. officer in charge, I directed that extensive training be conducted in all areas we might expect to be tasked. While the air crew conducted training, the maintenance side of the house was hard at work stripping the aircraft of all non-essential equipment to maximize space available for transport. Once we arrived on station in Haiti, we received a quick brief from CVW-17 on how operations were being conducted. That evening, we launched an aircraft to survey the area and find the landing zones (LZs) discussed in the brief. When that crew returned, they briefed the other air crew on what to expect, and how to find the LZs being used. The following morning the first crew headed to downtown Port-Au-Prince to begin the humanitarian mission.

The first day included a lot of troop transport and food and water delivery. An SH-60B can normally carry a maximum of two passengers along with one air crew member, but many waivers were in place and up to eight troops with full gear were transported along with two air crew member to aid with confined-area operations. Aircraft initially conducted operations by calling an overhead E-2C for tasking while inbound. Our instructions were to report to Port-Au-Prince airport for tasking, but occasionally we were assigned other LZs to work. If we reported to the airport, we were loaded with troops, food, or water, and sent out to an LZ. Initially, all the LZs were in the Port-Au-Prince area, but each day more zones were added that were further away. We would fly into a grassy area beside the runway and jump in line. The ground troops stationed at the airport were quite efficient as they staged supplies and lined up the helos. The end helo would be loaded and sent out, and the next aircraft in line would reposition to the vacant loading spot to be supplied and tasked.

On those occasions when the E-2C had other taskings for us, it was usually a medevac mission. We would report to an LZ, pick up a patient, and deliver that person wherever a bed was available. Most often that meant USNS *Comfort* (T AH 20), but, if it was full, *Bataan* and *Carl Vinson*, or even Sacred Heart, a hospital 45 minutes to the north, would take our patients. Subsequent missions included numerous medevac flights, more food and water distribution, troop transport, survey flights, and even a few “angel” flights, in which expired patients were returned home for burial. These were very different from the normal SH-60B mission of surface search and coordination. At times, LZs became unusable because of the Haitians gathering near them in anticipation of getting desperately needed food and water. In at least one instance, one of our crews had to quickly depart an LZ before unloading their supplies as they were being rushed. The crew was able to move a safe distance away and unload their supplies. “It was an honor to be there and exciting to make basic on-site risk management decisions,” said Lt. Brian Mowry, “even as a young helicopter aircraft commander.”

For many of us, this was a very motivating way to start our flying careers. Four of the det.’s eight pilots had never deployed as pilots, and only the officer in charge had more than one deployment as an aviator. In the end, the Seagulls flew 146 hours over a period of less than three weeks transporting 107 medevacs, 416 military and media members and other passengers, and more than 90,000 pounds of food, water, medical supplies, and other cargo. Because of necessary preparations for the spring deployment of *Normandy* and Det. 3, we were brought home in early February. Altogether, Navy aircraft and helos flew more than 4,300 hours and transported nearly 4.5 million pounds of relief supplies to the Haitian people between January and the end of March.

I could not have been more pleased with the way all members of the detachment stepped up, adapted to the demands of the mission, exercised effective operational risk management and executed flawlessly, despite dynamic and challenging situations. The crew of *Normandy* provided excellent support throughout. The ship/air integration was terrific, and really made it all possible.

Despite the news cameras and happy families waiting for us at home, the most important thing that we all took from this was the knowledge that our actions in Haiti will impact that country for years to come. It was an honor to have taken part in this tremendous effort to bring assistance to the people of Haiti in their time of need.

Lt. Cmdr. Hansen is the air boss for HSL-46 Det. 3.

## Hawkeyes, Greyhounds, and Clippers Contribute

*In addition to the many Navy and Marine Corps rotary-wing aircraft that deployed for Operation Unified Response, E-2C Hawkeyes from VAW-125, C-2A Greyhound aircraft from VRC-30 and -40, and aircraft from nearly every VR logistics support squadrons deployed to the Caribbean to provide command support and disaster relief supplies to the people of Haiti.*

*Reserve C-40A Clippers and other logistics support aircraft transported nearly 2.5 million pounds of cargo to Guantanamo Bay, where C-2As and other aircraft transshipped the supplies to Port-au-Prince airport. From there, water, food, and medical supplies were dispensed around the earthquake-damaged zone.*



*C-2A Greyhounds VRC-40 (above) and VRC-30 were able to bring cargo to Carl Vinson and Port-au-Prince airport when larger aircraft had trouble landing. E-2Cs from VAW-125 (below) based at Guantanamo Bay provided command-and-control support to Unified Response.*

*(Photos by MC2 Adrian White and Sgt. Michael Balz)*



# Making a Lasting Impact

By MCSN Erin L. Boyce, USN

As news channels across the nation announced the devastation delivered by the earthquake in Haiti, ABCM (AW/SW) Peggy Carrington, leading chief of the air department aboard *Bataan*, was wrapping up post-deployment stand-down leave. Just 28 days earlier, as *Bataan* pulled pierside to her homeport of Norfolk, Carrington had congratulated her Sailors on a successful deployment. The 22nd MEU and HSC-22 had completed 2,200 sorties and participated in several international naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean.

The crew was weary and still rekindling relationships with family and friends, but when Carrington heard news of the quake, she had a feeling *Bataan* would surge and the air department would play a major role. Carrington, along with other air department leaders, began recalling Sailors and preparing them for Haiti.

“We pulled our divisions together and told them to pack up and prepare for a three-month deployment,” said Carrington. “They had 48 hours to prepare. We issued camelbaks and the proper flight deck gear. We made sure their families were taken care of, that there were no issues.”

The ship departed mid-Atlantic waters on 14 January—48 hours after the earthquake shook Haiti’s capital city of Port-au-Prince and outlying areas.

*Bataan* and the 22nd MEU were on-station four days later with a complement of Navy and Marine Corps aircraft—MH-60S Knighthawks, UH-1N Hueys, and CH-53E Sea Dragons—tailored for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions.

The moment the shores of Haiti were in reach, *Bataan*’s “Blue/Green Team” had aircraft overhead conducting aerial assessments. Because of the natural barriers created by the earthquake, many Haitians couldn’t be reached by ground forces. So the Navy/Marine Corps team established nine landing zones, and the rotary-wing aircraft went to work.

“The MH-60s and CH-53s had the ability to fly into landing zones and other remote locations that were hard for the ground support to reach because of the washed out roads or unserviceable docks or damaged airports,” said Carrington.

In those early stages of Operation Unified Response, the flight deck saw a flurry of activity—relief supplies began moving ashore and search-and-rescue helicopters returning from the newly established landing zones began touching down with Haitians in need of urgent medical care. In less than two days, 23 patients were medically evacuated to the ship’s hospital.



"It was ridiculously busy the first few days in Haiti," said ABFAN (AW) Ryan Multerer. "It was helos in and out, transporting people to medical. There were injured people on almost every helo that landed; at least 10 people a day flew in needing medical attention. We had to transfer this one guy who wasn't breathing onto a [helicopter] to get him over to the USNS *Comfort*. I felt I saved that guy's life that day. If we weren't there in a quick fashion, the outcome could've been different."



AM2 Pierre Doreus, assigned to HSC-26, helps a Haitian girl fill out her immunization card at a clinic in Grand Goave, Haiti. The clinic was set up by the U.S. Public Health Service and Sailors, Marines, and embarked staff from USS *Bataan*.  
(Photo by MC1 Christina M. Shaw)

*Bataan's* flight deck remained open for business until 24 March, 10 weeks after the ship arrived in Haiti. Through nearly 2,000 flight hours, the ship and 22<sup>nd</sup> MEU delivered nearly 620,000 liters of water, more than 4.5 million pound of relief supplies, medically evacuated 97 patients to *Bataan*, and provided transport for another 524 Haitian patients to and from *Comfort*, *Carl Vinson*, and hospitals throughout Port-au-Prince.


"If we didn't have [the Navy -53s and -60s], we wouldn't be able to help out Haiti as much as we did," said ABF Brandyi Phillips, one of *Bataan's* tower operators. "The pilots and air crew from those squadrons were already trained, so whenever it came time to help with the relief it came naturally to them, and we had no issues. The ship's crew had flight quarters everyday for the past seven months [of deployment]."

Even in January and March, temperatures in Haiti hovered well above 90 degrees, and on the flight deck and in the hangar bay, two of the ship's hottest spaces, *Bataan's* aviation team continued to push toward mission success without complaint.

"It was very hot outside and the hours were very long," said Multerer. "We had to be on deck at 0500 every day till 1900 in the blazing heat, but none of that mattered because in the long run we were saving lives."

Working alongside on the flight deck and hangar bay, *Bataan's* combat cargo team accounted for and loaded every person, piece of equipment, and shipment of supplies that left the deck. In many instances cargo would arrive aboard *Bataan* for further distribution to other ships in the areas of operations, and the team did everything necessary to maintain a safe, quick, and continuous flow.

"Everyone had a hand in the loading and unloading of aircraft," said Lt. Matthew Martin, *Bataan's* assistant air officer. "Even with vertical replenishments, everybody chipped in—ship's crew, air department, jerseys of all colors. *Bataan* helped the people of Haiti, and we were all motivated and excited for the mission."

Carrington's story was similar to that of all the leaders spread throughout the ship, MEU, and every squadron involved in Operation Unified Response. They couldn't have known an earthquake would strike Haiti on 12 January. But when it happened, they had their Sailors and Marines prepared, and they made a lasting impact on an entire country. 

Seaman Boyce serves with *Bataan's* public affairs department.